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***Mountain: Nature and Culture.* By Veronica Della Dora. London: Reaktion Books. 2016. 264 pp. £14.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781780236476**

***The Mountain: A Political History from the Enlightenment to the Present.* By Bernard Debarbieux and Gilles Rudaz. London: University of Chicago Press. 2015. 352 pp. \$50 cloth. ISBN: 9780226031118**

As a scholar of rural geography within mountainous areas I have long felt that mountains are far more than physical features in the landscape. These two books present mountains as social, cultural and material products, tracing their histories from earliest recorded understandings to modern day debates. The mountain thus becomes an idea: diverse, plural and ever-changing.

Mountain: Nature and Culture draws the reader in, exploring the study of mountains (understood as social objects) in a manner that is distinctly a work of cultural geography. Della Dora's efforts to situate mountains as social constructs maps onto Geography's engagement with landscape, adding specificity, and height, to that continuing endeavour. Her work takes a thematic approach, charting understandings of the mountain through ideas of 'Vision', 'Life and Death' and 'Heritage'. Rather than merely asking what these concepts have done to conceptualisations of mountains, she flips the focus of enquiry, asking what mountains themselves have given to understandings of these broader themes. This switch in emphasis is the book's main strength, and Della Dora writes with a linear clarity and progression of ideas using varied examples from the cosmic geographies of mountain-centred cultures to more recent popular accounts such as Jon Krakauer's 1996 book *Into the Wild*. These examples track around the globe and vary in scale, placing the mountain forever centre stage. Importantly, however, these examples do not detract from the narrative of depicting mountains as active in the creation of the world in which they are part. This book is an important addition to any attempt to understand landscape and pushes toward a new direction for landscape studies, one which seeks to understand the geography of specific environments.

To some extent, *The Mountain: A Political History from the Enlightenment to the Present* could be considered akin to *Mountain: Nature and Culture*. Both books, at times, stray into the realms of historical theology and anthropology in discussing mountains and their inhabitants. Both consider mountains as objects created rather than discovered, arguing – as Della Dora puts it – that '[t]he history of mountains is deeply interlaced with our cultural values, with our aesthetic tastes and scientific practices' (p. 8). Following a conceptual opening, Debarbieux and Rudaz lay out a number of thematic chapters in which they analyse 'the figures by means of which the idea of the mountain has participated in the social and political life of the last three centuries' (p. 9). Their work focuses on understanding mountains and their use as political tools or boundary designations. Unfortunately, however, while Debarbieux and Rudaz's hybrid treatment of history, geography and politics is undeniably thorough, at times the 'mountain' gets lost behind their broader focus on national expansion, forestry, environmental protection and the establishment of social policy. As such, this book most effectively serves as a manual for the management of high places, well written and researched certainly, but fundamentally different in its approach to earth writing.

It is in the tones of these works, then, that they fundamentally differ. The triumph of Della Dora's work is that it provides a solid engagement with a range of academic theories yet simultaneously remains light in touch. It is intriguing in its ideas, geographically disparate (incorporating examples from all five continents) and peppered with illustrations that convince the reader of the magic of mountains. *Mountain: Nature and Culture* will assume an important place in the emerging field of popular academic work on earthly landscapes. *The Mountain*, on the other hand, is heavy in its factual input and academic tone. Nevertheless, it too has the potential to change the way we understand mountains, their use, and impact upon the world. In a changing climate – where mountains are increasingly regulated – Debarbieux and Rudaz's book may serve as an important historical manual of mountain politics. The divergence of these two works is perhaps emblematic of the enigma of the mountain: difficult to define, place specific, and culturally unique. Despite their

differences these two books cumulatively highlight the importance of mountains in the world at large and call for new ways of considering the earth's high places. As such, these two books both effectively outline how mountains, to quote Della Dora, 'capture our attention' (p. 7), revealing avenues of research on rural landscapes which deserve further attention.

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